Spinning Like a Kite: A Closer Look at the Pseudotransactional Function of Writing

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Nowhere outside of composition classes does one write to conform with a certain rhetorical law. The condition is absurd.

Gertrude Buck

I feel that most writing assignments I do in school ask me to practice writing as [what Plato would call a] "craft" when, really, I think (and I think my teachers must know) that I have only developed the "knack" of doing what's expected of me. Even so, my teachers tell me I write well, so I guess I can't complain.

Liz, a college senior

A quarter of a century ago, Lloyd Bitzer initiated what would become a critical conversation in rhetoric with his description of a rhetorical situation. Embedded in this conversation was the issue of a situation's "reality" and its relationship to genuine rhetoricality, for in setting out the parameters that define a "real" rhetorical situation, Bitzer makes reference to "unreal" situations that only appear to be rhetorical and argued that "neither the fictive situation nor the discourse generated by it is rhetorical" (11). A few years later, Richard Vatz's well-known response to Bitzer countered that "no situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter ..." and that the reality of a rhetorical situation is not objective but rather depends on the rhetor's desire and ability to create it (154).

The debate has recessed, but in this paper I wish to argue that the issue of what constitutes a genuine rhetorical exigence continues to pose a vital challenge to fields such as writing. I will begin with the premise that the ubiquitous "rhetorical-writing" classroom encourages unauthentic writing. Given certain commonsense constraints on writing instruction, rhetorical-writing curricula invite what has been called "pseudotransactionality" or the illusion of rhetorical transaction (Tamor and Bond). I then broadly sketch two ways in which the writing field has reacted to the issue of pseudotransactionality. The first type of reaction, which I label "denial," either presumes that students are engaged in genuine transactions or else trivializes the obstacles to transactionality engendered by classroom exigen-
cies. Though denials of pseudotransactionality are rarely explicit, I believe this reaction pervades writing pedagogy, theory and research. But a second type of reaction, which might be called "escape," is evinced in writing movements that have tacitly moved to make writing more authentically transactional. Here, I briefly note that collaboration, reading-to-write, and writing-across-the-curriculum have served as would-be escapes but that writing-across-the-curriculum seems to meet with the greatest success. Finally, I conclude with an attempt to clarify why, despite the field's attempted escapes from the dilemmas posed by pseudotransactionality, I believe widespread acknowledgment of, and investigation into, the pseudotransactional function of writing has been, and will continue to be, slow in coming. But to start, it may be useful to review notions such as transactionality and pseudotransactional and their relationship to authenticity.

The Pseudotransactional Function of Writing
The history of transactionality as a construct of concern to English departments is generally attributed to Louise Rosenblatt. Rosenblatt herself traces her use of the term to John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, but suggests that it can be traced back further to early pragmatists such as Charles Peirce. Rosenblatt argues that it was Dewey and Bentley who emphasized the term's difference from interaction in the sense that transactionality did not refer to two discrete subjects operating upon one another but rather to "an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (17). Accordingly, transactionality does not exclusively lie in an author's intention to communicate, but in the writer and reader's process of jointly constructing the text in line with their motives, expectations, and sense of the other. Thus, the extent to which a piece of writing serves as a transaction is bound up in both the writer's and audience's stance toward the text: an a priori assumption in most contemporary theories of communication.

More recently, however, a new dimension has been added to the notion of transactionality: that of authenticity. It is in the field of writing, as personified by James Britton and his colleagues, that we first get a sense of transactionality as a function as well as a process. Britton's research team at the University of London's Institute of Education cataloged the types of functions writing served for secondary school students and labeled as "transactional" that writing which was used to "get things done' or participate in the world's affairs: i.e., in our model, to inform, persuade, or instruct" (218). The study suggested that transactional writing (rather than expressive or poetic writing, the two other major writing functions) predominates in writing tasks across the curriculum. In an economics class, for instance, students often write to demonstrate their understanding of assigned readings. Other classroom transactions may include evaluating arguments and models or applying a theory to a particular problem. Still other assignments
can be transactional if they require that a student demonstrate a method of analysis or argue for a well-informed opinion. Let me emphasize that in Britton's scheme (which I adopt in this paper) transactional writing is that which does not pretend to function in anyway other than it does: in this sense, its rhetorical aims are transparent; its purported audience and purposes are authentic.

Although the Britton et al. study dealt primarily with the expressive, poetic, and, above all, transactional functions of writing, it designated a fourth category which lumped together "special" writing tasks: those which invited "pseudo-informative," "pseudo-conative," and "dummy run" responses. These are what Tamor and Bond later termed "pseudotransactional" functions as they all center on writing which appears to be transactional, but is not. Key to the Britton study's explanation of "pseudo" functions is that the writing is solely intended to meet teacher expectations rather than engage in a transference of information for the purposes of informing the uninformed or demonstrating mastery over content. The tone of the Britton study suggests that pseudotransactional assignments are as uncommon as they are unfortunate, and they are treated as somewhat aberrant.²

One reason Britton et al. could so easily set aside pseudotransactions may be because the study was performed in Britain; writing in British English classes is most often used in the service of mastering a literary content area, which, as the Britton scheme notes, demands a genuine student-teacher transaction. Perhaps for this reason this landmark study did not touch on a very common sort of writing performed in American schools: writing which is produced for its own sake for the purpose of instructing students in rhetorical response (that is, instruction in what I have labeled "rhetorical-writing"). Rhetorical-writing is, if not an American invention, a staple of American education to a degree that foreigners often find incomprehensible. One might therefore have thought that the American equivalent of the Britton study, Context for Learning to Write: Studies of Secondary School Instruction (Applebee), would emphasize the role of the pseudotransactional writing but, surprisingly, the opposite is true: the "pseudo" categories are omitted completely. Although Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee are clearly aware of pseudotransactions, they regard such writing as a pitfall that can, and should, be avoided. In their words:

Though the teacher will usually initiate classroom activities, these activities should provide scope for the students to develop their own purposes, rather than simply to demonstrate their own knowledge and skill within the teacher's preemptive framework. (175-76)

As David Russell notes, the Applebee team reported that, in American schools, "such extended writing as there was fit the pattern the British had found: transactional writing for an audience of the teacher in the role of examiner" (281). The study acknowledges that schooling often imposes
“special contexts” in which pseudotransactional writing may take place, but like Britton et al., Applebee et al. view such writing as of marginal importance or interest. As a result, the thrust of both the Britton and Applebee studies was to call for expanding writing opportunities beyond the transactional (especially into the more expressive genres) rather than to look critically at the “pseudo” functions.

The Context of the Writing Classroom
Carole Edelsky and Karen Smith account for the lack of interest in pseudotransactions by suggesting that “it seems reasonable to assume that professionals and policy makers believe that findings on unauthentic writing can be ‘generalized’ to authentic writing” (25). I believe, however, this assumption implies a degree of conscious decision-making that may not exist. In fact, a principal point I wish to raise in this paper is that the writing field generally does not make the distinction between unauthentic and authentic writing and thus the issue of transfer from the classroom to other contexts hardly ever arises. Evidence of this can be found in a recent bibliographic essay reviewing the research on writing functions that has been generated by the Britton study (Durst and Newell). This comprehensive essay seems to indicate that investigation into the “pseudo” functions of writing is nonexistent.

Although the function is often treated (if treated at all) as an irrelevant footnote, however, pseudotransactionality is not as unusual as it is commonly portrayed. I would argue that when we ignore pseudotransactionality we are ignoring certain contextual features of the rhetorical-writing classroom. Although classroom constraints are of concern to teachers of any subject matter, when one considers the intensely context-sensitive nature of rhetoric it seems especially ironic that the writing classroom, as a context, has largely escaped empirical study. Yet the importance of context to function is hard to overstate. As Green et al. have argued,

> Without this step [seeking to understand the nature of the classroom], we cannot know whether the language that was produced and observed is a result of the student’s ability or an artifact of the social expectations for participating in the daily life of the classroom. Thus, we are arguing that to ignore the patterned ways of “doing life” in the classrooms is analogous to decontextualizing print in the study of literacy. (337)

The context for writing usually specifies the ways in which the written product can be used. In fact, it might be said that different writing contexts are distinguishable from one another only insofar as they encourage certain functions and inhibit others. Thus, the culture of the composition classroom and the contexts it provides go a good way toward determining the sorts of writing that can occur there. 3

In 1901, Gertrude Buck, who like Rosenblatt drew inspiration from the work of Dewey (Campbell), looked around her own writing classrooms and
noted that "genuine occasions for writing" were disturbingly few, and she devoted a good deal of effort to creating such opportunities. Before and since Buck's time, however, certain features of the writing classroom have remained, and I take their resilience as a sign of their intrinsie to the nature of rhetorical training. Features relevant to the present topic can be reduced to the following three:

1) The writing classroom is *formative* in that it presumes that students are developing, rather than merely exhibiting, knowledge and skills.

2) The writing classroom, structured hierarchically with the teacher as the central authority, is also *evaluative*; that is, one of the teacher's principal functions is to use his or her authority to legitimize students' written products.

3) Students in the classroom generally want to produce legitimized products. If we combine these features with rhetorical standards for success (for example, appropriateness of audience, purpose and persona) we create the ideal environment for the production of pseudotransactions.

To begin with, formation implies that one's writing skills are neither the product of spontaneous generation, nor innate genius, and that a principal purpose for writing in a writing classroom is not merely to produce text, but to get better at producing it. Students know this. The role of the teacher-as-authority has not escaped students' notice either, though as Susan Hubbuch notes, even this basic facet of education is not readily accepted by many teachers of writing. She observes that "Power makes many academics uneasy. It smells of coercion, manipulation, exploitation—control" (35). Still, authority is difficult to deny. If success in higher education and life experience is any measure, a writing teacher must generally be presumed to be the most academically sophisticated person in the classroom, making it understandably difficult for students to feel that they can use their writing to inform in a way that genuine transactions normally require. Given the opportunity to decline authority over our students' writing in the classroom, no doubt many of us would, and many have spoken eloquently on the importance of allowing students to write in their own voice (Brooke; Brannon and Knoblauch; Elbow; Stewart). Nevertheless, as Hubbuch makes clear, everyday reality continually reminds us that teachers do not, perhaps cannot, abdicate their authority.

As unthreatening as we may wish to make ourselves and our classrooms, education, being what it is, inevitably undermines any such abdication: teachers almost invariably assign a grade or otherwise set the standards by which writing is legitimated. Margaret Mansfield argues that attempts to reproduce "the real world in the classroom seem intrinsically doomed to fail since students will likely measure their success ... by the grades we teachers give them" (69). She goes on, "it is not a 'real' situation to be writing differently because of one's awareness of a reader who would not merely learn or do but who would judge and evaluate" (72).
The subject of evaluation brings us back to the issue of pseudotransactionality for there is an intimate connection between the criteria on which we gauge a text's success and its function. In transactional contexts (those outside the formative context of the rhetorical-writing classroom) writing generally entails accomplishing something beyond the production of the writing itself. Put simply, transactive writing is a means to an end. We write to get something done, be it to "make things happen" or to alter an attitude. Conversely, pseudotransactions required by assignments do not have to result in any action being taken, any attitude being changed; they need only appear to have that potentiality in the teacher's opinion.

For this reason, the final classroom feature I have presented as inherent in writing instruction suggests that an obvious and predictable aim of most students in the writing classroom is to produce writing that the instructor validates as "good." Whereas a writer operating outside of an instructional situation usually has rhetorical objectives independent of his or her audience's expectations or demands, it is uncommon and often unnecessary for students to have rhetorical aims beyond getting a good grade and, one hopes, learning to reflect upon and manage one's composing processes. In sum, although the context of the rhetorical-writing classroom is, like all contexts, a constructed one, it is the teacher's construction that "counts" in the minds of many students. We may claim that students are free to do what they wish with their writing, but the seemingly intractable nature of composition education makes this claim suspect.

Reactions to Pseudotransactions
When the context of the rhetorical-writing classroom is seen in this light, it becomes clear that our expectations of transactionality often lead us to evaluate students on criteria that put students in rhetorically impossible situations (see Bartholomae). Gertrude Buck put it wonderfully nearly a century ago:

Even if thoroughly indoctrinated with rhetorical formulae, the average student is conscious of no particular desire to "produce an effect of vivacity." . . . Hence, when his work is estimated by these alien (rhetorical) standards, he feels much as would any intelligent youth to whom, when making a kite, some insane elder should remark in passing—"That will never spin in the world." The reply, "Well, who wants it to? This isn't a top!" (376)

Of course, in real life, students rarely reply so brazenly to us insane elders. After all, we are in a position to award C's, D's, and F's to kites that don't spin properly. The problem is a serious one, for it brings the issue of ethics front and center. What are we to do with the occasional student who is brazen (or naive) enough to complain that he or she is unwilling or unable to suspend disbelief? My concern is related to the disturbing point Lester Faigley raises when he notes that many writing professionals are showing an increasing
willingness to evaluate not only students' texts, but students as people. I would argue that holding students accountable to the genuineness of the personas they produce in this writing situation is as morally questionable as it is teleologically confusing. It is perhaps because pseudotransactionality raises ethical issues such as this, that the writing field has tacitly reacted to the issue in basically one of two ways: "denial" or "escape."

**Denial**

As many writers have suggested, the writing profession in general is understandably uncomfortable with the idea that teachers direct, in large part, student writers' reasons for writing. Although some in the field have addressed head-on the nature of power relationships endemic to education (see Bartholomae; Bizzell; Hubbuch), many others have tacitly opted for a Rockwellian conception of the writing class: one in which students write because they want to, because they come to class equipped with rhetorical aims and purposes or (through the invention techniques we teach) can be made to bring latent aims and purposes to light. Within this neo-romantic scheme of things, the instructor's task is to enable students to be true to their ideas and to adapt those ideas to their audiences. Though I've suggested that this perspective is largely tacit, this excerpt from an NCTE position statement clearly illustrates what I would call a "passive" sort of denial:

The specific purposes for writing vary widely, from discovering the writer's own feelings, to persuading others to a course of action, recreating experience imaginatively, reporting the results of observation, and more. Student writers should have the opportunity to define and pursue writing aims that are important to them. (612)

A second, more "active" variety of denial, has also surfaced in composition literature, however. This active denial shows a willingness to confront the fact that a student's performance in the writing classroom may not be as unproblematic as the NCTE statement suggests, and acknowledges that writers are not naturally given opportunities to pursue their own aims. Nevertheless, its proponents insist that, given sufficient goodwill/reflection on the part of the instructor, students can be "freed" to engage in the sort of transactions we know they really want to perform. Brannon and Knoblauch's article on students' "rights to their own texts" illustrates this assumption by arguing that "when we pay more attention to our Ideal Texts than to the writer's purposes and choices, we compromise both our ability to help students say effectively what they truly want to say and our ability to recognize legitimately diverse ways of saying it" (159). The authors seem to suggest that we can avoid pseudotransactions by valuing the transactions in which our students truly wish to engage.

Similar examples abound. In perhaps his last published work, well-respected compositionist Donald Stewart sounds an alarm. Stewart suggests that both cognitivists and constructionists in composition work within
paradigms that have the effect of denying students an authentic voice. He laments that many students write "words-for-teachers instead of words-for-me (the student)" and makes a strong appeal for a "return" to the privileging of authentic voice. If one accepts the intractability of the features of the writing classroom as I have presented them, the return to which Stewart refers must be to authenticity-cum-romantic ideal rather than practical goal, because "words-for-teacher" are, like it or not, what the classroom demands and, I suspect, has always demanded. Although denial of the essentially formative and evaluative nature of the writing classroom persists, it hardly seems reasonable given everything we've come to associate with an American conception of education.

Escape

It would be a mistake to trivialize the writing field's approach to pseudotransactionality as merely the story of willful denial, however. In many cases, tacit reaction to pseudotransactionality has been the engine powering a number of movements in the writing field, and the profession has a long and interesting history of remaking itself in ways that, perhaps only coincidentally, permit it to move away from pseudotransactionality. Collaboration, "reading-to-write" courses, and writing across the curriculum all have the effect of encouraging more genuine audiences and purposes for writing, or, in the Britton typology, writing that is more truly transactional. Some of these escapes, though, have proven more successful than others.

Collaboration. One of the less successful escape routes, in my opinion, passes through the collaborative classroom that has recently been the focus of so much attention. As collaboration has been seen as a panacea for so much of what ails us (see Bruffee), it is unsurprising that it has also been recommended as a cure for pseudotransactionality. The idea is a venerable one. Buck herself thought that the best audience was those teachers or peers who could reflect back to the writer what he or she had written, as the student's judgment of how well he or she had achieved his or her purpose was the most legitimate, "natural" one. And yet, collaboration would appear to do little to mask the inauthenticity of the writing situation. Complementing a single authoritative reader (the teacher) with one or more peer readers may, no doubt, provide benefits to writing of any kind—the more feedback, the better—but this arrangement comes no closer to guaranteeing that the writing will become more transactional, that the writer's stated purposes will be any more authentic, or that the writer's audience will be any more in need or want of information. In fact, many of us who have relied upon collaborative techniques in the classroom are familiar with the after-class dawdler who intimates that his or her collaborator is an unworthy partner and asks that you, the real audience, provide more authoritative feedback.
Reading-to-Write. Reading-to-write is less of a movement than an approach to writing instruction. Also known as "writing from sources," this approach can do much to prompt authentically transactional writing. In my own advanced writing course, for example, I use materials on rhetorical theory as the content over which students must use writing to demonstrate their mastery (the quote from Liz that introduces this paper was taken from her response to an assignment I gave students in my upper-division writing course which required them to explain Plato's distinction between **knack** and **craft** in his *Gorgias* by applying it to their own "typical" writing performance). Because I make it clear to students that they are writing to demonstrate to me, their evaluator, that they can competently synthesize and analyze rhetorical theory, Britton would probably classify my assignments as ones which prompt genuine transaction.

Though I am generally satisfied with the way I have structured this reading-to-write course, I have found that students still resist performing the transaction I require, usually for one of two reasons. First, their previous experience in writing courses makes them wary of my claim that I am using their writing to evaluate their understanding of content. That is, they suspect that my purported interest in teaching about rhetoric is all an elaborate ruse to "sugar-coat" either the persuasive essay or the technically slick essay that I really want. A second reason is that the readings may prove too difficult for some students and they find that writing pseudotransactionality (again, by either arguing for "their position" on an issue or by demonstrating a mastery of formulaic organization) is actually easier than performing the transaction of demonstrating understanding of the material. For this reason reading-to-write is not necessarily an "escape." It can be so only insofar as the teacher emphasizes (and students accept) that the purpose of the writing is to demonstrate comprehension or analysis of the materials rather than using the readings as a prompt for "inventing" a thesis or an argumentative response.

Writing-across-the-curriculum. Kinneavy has noted that the idea of teaching writing by having students write in content courses "may signal the most important change in teaching writing in America in the past decade as well as the shape of the future" (353). McLeod writes that "WAC programs are not additive, but transformative—they aim not at adding more papers and tests of writing ability, but at changing the way both teachers and students use writing in the curriculum" (3). To my mind, WAC provides the most successful escape from the problems pseudotransactionality engenders.

Presently, two justifications for implementing WAC programs are most often given: 1) proponents of writing-to-learn argue that writing furthers understanding of any disciplinary content (Fulwiler and Young), and 2) the current focus on disciplinary discourse communities suggests that learning disciplinary conventions is a critical component of advanced literacy.
I believe that attention to pseudotransactionality may provide a third, important, rationale for moving toward writing-across-the-curriculum programs, a rationale that, as Russell's history of the movement would seem to indicate, has not been given much consideration.

WAC seems best suited for the encouragement of genuinely transactive writing because the task's purpose is relatively unambiguous as is the teacher-as-evaluator audience (McLeod). In addition, teachers in most courses outside the writing classroom assign students topics rather than require that they be "invented," exemplifying what the Britton study found to be the dominant writing function in British secondary schools and obviating the problem of what to do when a student genuinely has nothing he or she wishes to communicate. In short, the rhetorical difficulties faced by students confronting fictive rhetorical exigencies are lessened when writing becomes a means of achieving a goal outside its own production. Because WAC explicitly acknowledges writing's instrumentality, I believe it offers the best hope of encouraging students to view their writing as genuinely rhetorical.

To briefly summarize the points made in this section, I have argued that there is a pervasive denial of pseudotransactionality (or more positively stated, a presumption of transactionality) that underlies much of the writing field's mythos and pedagogy. I believe this can be seen in any number of discussions relating to purpose, invention, audience, and voice that seem to deny the formative and evaluative nature of writing instruction. This being said, however, writing teachers and theorists have shown themselves to be quite innovative in developing writing contexts other than those rhetorical-writing contexts which promote pseudotransactions. From my own perspective, the move toward WAC holds the most promise for those teachers wishing to ensure that their students are given an authentic rhetorical exigence and are being held accountable to genuine transaction.

Ending on a Downbeat

Few writing professionals would not share Haas and Flower's formulation of the problem writing instructors face in the classroom:

While experienced readers may understand that both reading and writing are context-rich, situational, constructive acts, many students may see reading and writing as merely an information exchange: knowledge telling when they are writing and "knowledge getting" when they read. Helping students move beyond this simple information-exchange view to a more complex rhetorical model—in both their reading and their writing—is one of the very real tasks which face us as teachers. (182)

Making a distinction between transactional and pseudotransactional writing, I believe, may illuminate problems both students and instructors face in overcoming "novice" conceptions of communication. It would give writing teachers, theorists and researchers an ability to talk about the construction of very different kinds of audience and purpose representations: those which
we naturally construct for ourselves in order to engage in transactions, and those which we construct in order to meet the goal of appearing as if we are engaging in transactions. It would give writing students a clearer sense of the transaction they are involved in and may even prompt the sort of reflection on one's subjectivity that has been called for by social theorists. A bit further afield, if students could be encouraged to accept their writing as more genuinely transactive, it might create opportunities for ego-involvement, for social contextualization and, consequently, for greater motivation (Petraglia, "The Effects").

I would be indulging in another sort of denial, however, if I did not briefly discuss why an overt acknowledgment of pseudotransactionality faces an uphill battle (the aforementioned downbeat). One such obstacle is rooted in what I have observed to be a general disciplinary unwillingness to engage in discussions of a writing context's "reality" or "authenticity." The weighty (and worthy) epistemological challenges posed by postmodernism's deemphasis on individual cognition too often have been distilled into the reductivist view that talk of a situation's reality is literally non-sense (Petraglia, "Interrupting").

Many in composition (including myself) subscribe to the view that all communication, by definition, occurs in a context mediated by an observer's mental representation that has an indeterminate relationship to any objective reality of that context (see Ong's observation that every audience is a fiction). I alight from this train of thought, however, when it is taken to follow that if every purpose and every audience is a mental representation, can there be any point in suggesting that some purposes and audiences are more "real" than others, that some rhetorical situations are more rhetorical than others, or that some contexts are more authentic than others? I would respond to this in terms of the Bitzer-Vatz exchange with which I opened this paper and ask why one must choose between the arguments that 1) "unreal" situations cannot spur authentically rhetorical responses, and that 2) such reality can only be granted by the rhetor? To question the transactive value of a writing task is not to question whether or not the exigence for writing is real in any objective sense, but whether (and the sense[s] in which) the writer is able or willing to legitimate it as real. Though it is, of course, difficult to gauge students' perceptions of a task's reality, difficulty seems insufficient cause to ignore that fact that such perceptions certainly exist and influence student attitudes and subsequent rhetorical behaviors.

Another barrier to investigation of pseudotransactionality is the field's current preoccupation with the political nature of writing instruction. As Sharon Crowley observes, "Recent professional essays about composition instruction suggest that teachers abandon the myth of the academic essay... and substitute an altogether more lofty purpose in its stead: they should aim to empower their students by giving them access to the literacy used in academic and/or bureaucratic discourse communities" (163). Indeed, a
A glance through some of our journals and conference programs might suggest to an outside observer that empowerment is what the profession is really about and that writing instructors spend most of their time fighting bigotry and marginalization. I would argue, however, that the day-to-day reality of the writing classroom for many students and teachers is much less epic. By emphasizing its role as a catalyst for broad social and political change, composition simultaneously distances itself from the more mundane (but perhaps equally important) purposes literacy serves for many students. In other words, too Freirean a focus on writing's potential political ramifications requires the denial of the formative and evaluative (and in this sense, conservative) nature of writing instruction (see Crowley 164). Though one might share many of the political agendas widely championed by writing theorists, it seems to me that an excessive eagerness to define the profession almost exclusively in terms of the relationship of language to power practically guarantees that pseudotransactionality will be seen as a political liability to be skirted both in theory and in research.

Finally, the obstacle to confronting pseudotransactionality that seems most ingrained, and thus most difficult to overcome, is the perceived value of rhetorical-writing curriculum as a bulwark to the current-traditionalism that most theorists in the field have fled. The argument goes something like this: In the absence of instruction in rhetorical-writing, students may never learn to move beyond what Scardamalia and Bereiter have called knowledgetelling to the more rhetorical acts of knowledge transforming. Accordingly, anything that undermines the rhetorical-writing classroom potentially cheats students of the opportunity to learn about rhetoric and threatens to drag us back into a morass of five-paragraph themes and grammar exercises. The fear that abandoning the rhetorical-writing classroom will detract from the development of rhetorical sensibilities seems unfounded, however. When a writer's notion of audience and purpose is unencumbered by classroom fictions, the real rhetorical challenges begin. As I suggested earlier, students may then have an opportunity—as well as a motive—to seriously reflect upon the rhetorical nature of their own schooling, another pedagogical objective that many in the field have long advocated, but which, like an understanding of pseudotransactionality itself, has suffered from a certain lack of candor.

I will close by noting that although pseudotransactional writing need not be a cause for alarm, it might at least serve as a cause for reflection. Though I do not doubt that there may be benefits to be derived from requiring students to imagine themselves in various roles, with various purposes, writing to various audiences, problems inevitably arise when it is not made clear to students that pseudotransactional writing is a sort of gaming in which the genuine rhetorical constraints imposed by the classroom context are not the rhetorical constraints they are being asked to address. It may be the failure to address the issue of pseudotransactionality (rather than pseudotransactionality itself) that, in my experience, contributes to the
common student perception that the study of writing is less of a content to be mastered and more of a hoop to be jumped through as quickly and painlessly as possible. Students and teachers alike may feel that it is the ability to suspend disbelief that is being taught and evaluated rather than the ability to develop and inscribe ideas and information. And they may be right. 10

Notes

1 By “rhetorical-writing” I am referring to the currently common approach to composition which has as its primary and explicit objective the teaching of writing as a rhetorical act and thus emphasizes rhetorical issues such as invention, persona, audience, and purpose; I am not suggesting that this writing is especially rhetorical (in fact, I argue quite the opposite) or that any other kind of writing is not rhetorical. The issue of pseudotransactionality, as discussed in this paper, generally pertains only to those classes which presume to instill rhetorical sensibilities, and so when I speak of “the writing classroom,” I am not referring to writing classes dedicated to developing creative, basic, or technical writing skills.

2 The study suggests that only 4.9 percent of the writing analyzed was judged to be motivated by the students’ perception of teacher expectation rather than a sense of authentic transaction.

3 Although the context of the classroom has received little attention in the writing field, a growing literature in education and psychology is examining the cognitive chasm between classroom-bound and “real world” or “situated” learning. I think the reader would find recent articles by Brown et al., Collins et al., Lave, and Resnick especially relevant to the issue of pseudotransactional writing.

4 Consigny, another participant in the early debate on the nature of rhetorical situations, makes the interesting observation that there is a presumed link between reality and morality. That is, if we accept the proposition that reality is constructed, people, as moral agents, must take responsibility for that construction.

5 A third reaction to pseudotransactionality is one that I often encounter in face-to-face conversations on this topic but one that I have not seen in print: that one may embrace pseudotransactionality as another legitimate function for writing. The argument suggests that pseudotransactions provide a sort of gaming experience that exercises a certain kind of rhetorical skill and that, therefore, pseudotransactions are useful fictions. The argument may be a good one, but until the embracing of pseudotransactionality is “put on the table,” denial and escape, as I am calling them here, seem to be the responses that permit investigation.

6 In Stewart’s 7/6/1991 correspondence with W. Ross Winterowd (published on page 439 of this same issue of JAC), he elaborates on his belief that teachers can create the conditions of “trust” which will enable students to write freely and honestly.

7 Bizzell’s recent article acknowledging and supporting the imposition of political values in the writing classroom is a notable exception to the rule. Although I consider Bizzell’s unapologetic stance refreshingly candid, in the concluding section of this paper I note that staking out the writing classroom as the locus of political action may reflect another denial of pseudotransactionality.

8 Of course, talk of a single, “genuine” audience is problematic, as writing often has multiple audiences. Still, I think a useful distinction can be made between writing which one might characterize as transactionally “diverse” (for example, intended for a number of audiences) as opposed to that which might more accurately be thought of as pseudotransactional (that is, writing which has to conceal from its real audience that it is being written for that audience).

9 In this course I invite students to write argumentatively if they feel they have a point they truly wish to argue, though I make clear that the objective of the assignment remains to
demonstrate a thorough understanding of the readings and that I am especially unappreciative of argument for argument’s sake.

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Works Cited


